



Consulting Report:
Wichita, Kansas

Prepared for:



May 2013

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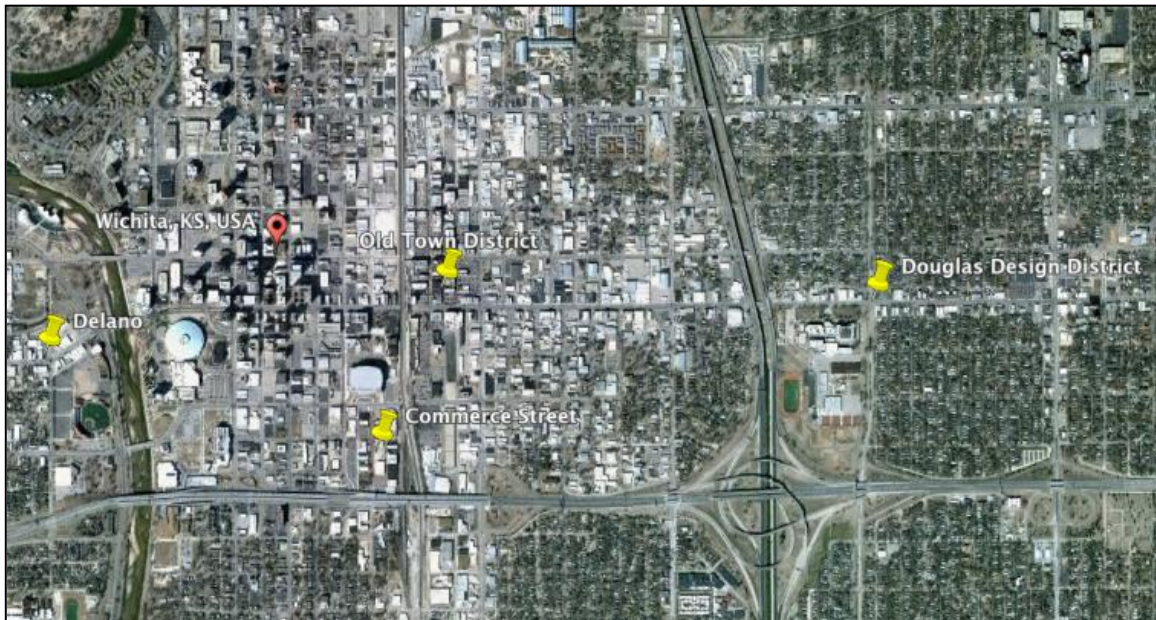
Introduction

With a metropolitan population of nearly 500,000, the City of Wichita, Kansas, is large enough to have several arts-focused areas in and around its central business district. The smallest of them, Commerce Street, occupies one block of a historic warehouse street near the Intrust Bank Arena, a major new sports facility on the east side of downtown. The City's Department of Cultural Affairs, interested to find out what, if anything, it should do to help Commerce Street grow, invited Artspace to visit Wichita, tour the area, talk with artists and other stakeholders, and share our insights.

Artspace's visit took place February 27 to March 1, 2013. Artspace was represented by Wendy Holmes, Senior Vice President for Consulting and Senior Partnerships, and Stacey Mickelson, Vice President for Government Relations. Over two days we conducted a series of meetings and focus groups with artists and creative business owners, elected officials and city staff, and other community leaders. In addition to Commerce Street, we toured three other neighborhoods in and around the core city where there are clusters of cultural and creative activities: Old Town, Delano, and the Douglas Design District. This report outlines what we observed and concludes with recommendation for next steps.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the City's Arts and Cultural Services department, led by John D'Angelo with the able assistance of Bernadette Bradshaw, for making our visit a pleasant and productive one.

Findings



Downtown Wichita, with the four arts districts identified by yellow push pins: Delano, on the west bank of the Arkansas River; Old Town and Commerce Street in the middle, and the Douglas Design District farther to the east.

Before proceeding, it may be useful to define what we mean by the term “arts district,” which goes by a variety of names – “cultural district” and “design district” are two common alternatives – and can be described in many different ways. Here, for example, is a straightforward definition from Wiki:

An arts and cultural district is a mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly area of a community in which a high concentration of cultural facilities or activities serves as the anchor of attraction and is a “place-based” economic development strategy.

And here is a less traditional definition from Urban Omnibus that draws a distinction between “organic” and “top-down” districts (New York’s Lincoln Center comes to mind) created by municipal fiat:

A Naturally Occurring Cultural (or Arts) District is distinguished by both its origins and organization. A NOCD (for lack of better term) supports existing neighborhood cultural assets rather than imposing arts institutions somewhere new. Traditional cultural districts are often used as a promotional tool to import visitors to a downtown shopping or commercial district and are generally centered on large institutions. The difference is important because each idea represents a distinct set of public values about what’s important to cities and what’s worth supporting.

In their 2006 book *Planning and Urban Design Standards*, Frederick Steiner and Kent Butler identify no fewer than five kinds of arts districts. For our purposes, however, we will limit the discussion to two:

- **commercial arts districts** filled with galleries, shops, restaurants, coffee shops, and the like, that are motivated by shared economic goals. The Plaza in Santa Fe is a celebrated example. Of downtown Wichita's four arts districts, Old Town is the most pronounced example of an arts district created and sustained by place-based economic strategies.
- **organic arts districts** motivated by the desire of artists and other creative individuals to reap the benefits of being in a community with other creative people. Commerce Street is the Wichita arts district that best matches this definition; although it attracts visitors for Final Friday arts crawls, it is in essence a warehouse district originally colonized by artists attracted by its promise of inexpensive space.

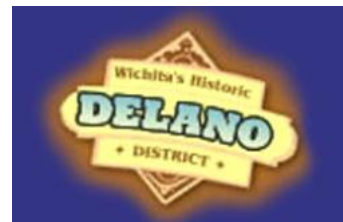
LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Of Wichita's four arts districts, three are more or less lined up, like pearls on a string, along Douglas Avenue, an east-west thoroughfare that runs through the heart of the downtown area. From west to east they are Delano, across the Arkansas River; Old Town, the largest and closest to downtown; and the Douglas Design District, which stretches over some three miles on the city's east side. The only area not on Douglas Avenue is Commerce Street, which is three blocks south of Old Town but separated from it by the Intrust Bank Arena.

The four districts have much in common, including a commitment to artists and a creative lifestyle. Significantly, they share a website, <http://projects.kansas.com/artcrawl/>, that provides information about the Final Friday art crawls as well as about the districts themselves. And it is worth noting that the City operates a trolley bus to provide free transportation between the districts on art crawl nights. Nevertheless, each district has its own distinct character, so in what follows we will look at them individually.

DELANO

Also called Historic Delano and the Delano Shopping and Entertainment District, the Delano area of Wichita sprang up in the 19th century as a stop on the Chisholm Trail, a cluster of saloons and brothels catering to the cowboys who drove the cattle north from Texas to Kansas railheads. Today, it is a mixture of creative businesses, shops, restaurants, artist studios,



galleries, residences, and churches. The neighborhood has had an active community development corporation, design guidelines, and a revitalization plan since 2003. These programs and infrastructure have been part of the impetus behind Friends University's plan to renovate two buildings in Delano into art studios, a gallery, offices and lecture hall. This will provide much-needed space for the University's cramped art department and bring more arts activities into the neighborhood. All in all, Delano appears to be doing well on its own.

OLD TOWN

This central business and entertainment district is characterized by its converted brick warehouse buildings. Over the past several decades, thanks to progressive planning policies by civic leaders, the mixed-use zoning of this former industrial area has encouraged a healthy



mixture of development that includes the arts, entertainment, creative businesses, corporate office space, boutique hotels, restaurants, and bars. It is a very attractive area that has drawn national attention for its conversion of 19th century manufacturing structures to buildings that house a dynamic, contemporary mix of uses.

Old Town has exponentially boosted area property values and put many properties back on the tax rolls since 1991, when Wichita changed its zoning laws to encourage development. While Old Town is not officially called an arts district, it looks and feels like a place-based arts district and it draws large crowds for Wichita's Final Friday monthly art crawls. It has theaters, creative businesses, galleries, and museums. Its success has put its rents out of reach for many individual artists, however, so working studios and live/work spaces are not currently part of the Old Town program. There is no doubt, however, that when you walk or drive into Old Town, you have arrived at a place that feels special.

DOUGLAS DESIGN DISTRICT

The Douglas Design District, a three-mile stretch of Douglas Avenue on the east side of downtown Wichita, is the city's newest arts district. Formerly an industrial area, it is now home to some 40 home design businesses of various kinds, several architect firms, and a dozen or more restaurants and bars, as well as a large number of older businesses that predate its recent transition. Streetscape improvements and zoning changes in 2011 have made a significant difference in transforming this area into a more cohesive arts district. A 2012 article in the Wichita Eagle describes it well:



Old Town and Delano have become hubs of artsy, musical hipness over the past several years – and aided in part by the Final Friday gallery crawl that draws big crowds downtown on the last Friday of every month. Now, another near-downtown neighborhood on the rise is looking to join the cool kids club. The Douglas Design District, which stretches along Douglas from one block east of Oliver to Washington, is developing a reputation as a fun place to mingle, dine on doughnuts and soup, and listen to music.

It's a particularly interesting development, say business owners in the area, considering that just a few years ago, it was considered a place no one would – or really should – venture to after dark. But now, store owners are banding together to help capitalize on energy created last spring at the Better Block Party, an event that drew 2,500 people to Douglas between Kansas and Hydraulic and featured food, music and frivolity. The event was designed to show how the Douglas Design District – named because of the nearly 40 home-design shops it also houses – could work if it were designed to be more pedestrian-and bicycle-friendly.

Although the Douglas Design District is clearly an up-and-coming area, it still faces significant challenges, including many vacant lots, underutilized buildings, and properties for sale. Among other things, it feels emptier than it should, in part because there doesn't appear to be much housing here.

COMMERCE STREET

South of the city's core, tucked into a corner formed by a railroad line and an elevated freeway, stands an unassuming but historically significant area brimming with arts activities. Formerly known as the Commerce Street Historic District, Commerce Street began its transition into an arts-friendly area some 15 years ago when pioneering artists purchased the Fisch Haus building and converted it into a place to live and work. Their presence attracted other artists, and now Commerce Street is a bona fide arts district – albeit a small one, especially compared to the larger, well-established areas of Delano and Old Town.

Although the City has not formally designated Commerce Street as an arts district, the artists who live and work there have been calling it an arts district for some years now, ever since the prospect of having to share their neighborhood with the new Intrust Bank Arena made it clear to them that they needed to forge a stronger and more marketable identity. That they have been at least partly successful is reflected in the facts that they are an integral part of the Final Friday gallery crawls and that their fate is now an issue of interest at City Hall. Most Wichitans with an interest in the arts seem to know of this tiny arts enclave in their midst. It may not be large, but as the Final Friday website (projects.kansas.com/artcrawl) proclaims, it is “what could arguably be the hippest single block in Wichita.”

Two things about this brick-paved block of former industrial buildings stand out: most if not all the artists own their own spaces – living, working, and exhibition spaces – which is unusual for an arts district; and there is a market-rate loft project, Finn Lofts, tastefully located in the middle of the block, that attracts other artists, creative residents, and



Interior of Commerce Street Lofts, a rehabbed industrial building in the 400 block of S. Commerce Street

businesses. This market-rate activity is relatively new. However, other arts-related businesses and galleries are now located on Commerce Street, giving this street the undeniable look and feel of an arts district.

Because the artists own their spaces, displacement of artists on Commerce Street is less likely than in Wichita's other developed arts districts. This puts the Commerce Street artists and the city in a unique position of being able to join

forces to encourage expansion of the district. The City may be motivated to encourage this expansion for economic reasons. The artists may be more motivated for reasons that have to do with attracting like-minded individuals to be a part of their growing arts community.

The Commerce Street artists have been working on a plan and programs to stabilize their neighborhood since 2005. This is an active and intelligent group of people who care deeply about their surroundings and want to protect their spaces and way of life. Any city would be lucky to have such a group of engaged citizens coming together to make positive things happen in their community. But the group is small. Adding more creative voices to the mix would help Commerce Street become a growing concern.

Recommendations

Officially designated or not, the four areas we visited are all functioning arts districts with a great deal of activity. That they have very different characters is a plus, in that each area will attract its own artists and audience. And their combined

economic power is more than the sum of their parts. A city policy that formally recognizes them as arts districts, combined with appropriate signage and a marketing plan that treats them as a multi-faceted civic asset, will further strengthen them.

Commerce Street, whose welfare is what prompted Wichita to contact Artspace, offers qualities not to be found in any of the other three. It is grittier, less commercial in orientation, and less dependent on the ancillary attractions of restaurants, bars, theaters, clubs, and gift shops. Some might say it has an attitude, or even a chip on its shoulder; at the very least, it seeks to appeal to a sophisticated art audience that is not put off by its rough edges and general air of scruffiness.



The Commerce Street arts district. The letter 'A' marks the northern end at Waterman Street, the elevated Kellogg Avenue freeway marks the southern end. Obstacles to expansion include the Intrust Bank Arena on the north, the railroad line on the east, and the freeway on the south.

WHICH WAY TO EXPAND?

The City would like to make it easier for the Commerce Street arts district to grow, but it is not sure which direction makes the most sense. The Intrust Bank Arena is a major obstacle to the north, principally because it blocks expansion but also because it is likely to encourage ancillary non-arts development, such as sports bars, at the north end of the arts district. But what about the other directions?

To the east, Mead Street is a nearby area with historic buildings and enough space to make it attractive to the City as a site for arts-related development. But it is on the other side of a railroad line, visually cut off from the Commerce Street area, and the only connection is an underpass at Waterman Street. For these reasons, we think Mead Street is unlikely to prove

conducive to expansion of Commerce Street unless the City aggressively pushes it. Even then, however, we think many Final Friday visitors would tend to stay on one side or the other; underpasses are notorious psychological obstacles, and this is a long one especially given the fact that these days only two tracks cross it. While it might be possible to transform the underpass from a frontier to be crossed into a welcoming gateway connecting its two sides, that kind of assignment does not come easily for an underpass.

This not to say that Mead Street cannot develop as an arts district on its own; it already has some arts uses, especially where it meets Douglas Avenue, and the planned renovation of the old depot may speed the process. But unless the Waterman Street underpass can be rebuilt in an artful way, we think it will continue to be a barrier that discourages Commerce Street from expanding in that direction. Finally, it should be noted that the parking lots on the east side of the underpass serve a useful purpose by providing space for arena patrons.

A similar obstacle discourages expansion to the south, where the freeway forms a visual and psychological barrier even though it is elevated and St. Francis Street passes through to the other side. Parking under the freeway overpass and a large scrap iron yard just on the other side are further impediments to growth in that direction.

We believe the path of least resistance – though it is by no means a path of *no* resistance – lies to the west: St. Francis Street, the next street over. For starters, it is much the closest: the space between Commerce and St. Francis is only half as wide as a normal block. While St. Francis largely lacks the historic charm of Commerce Street’s century-old brick buildings, it has at least some of the same industrial feel and a few historic structures; like Commerce, it is brick-paved. And it has a good deal of open space, most of it used for parking, that could be repurposed for infill development; indeed, there are projects already in the works at the end nearest the Arena. The primary obstacles in this direction are four relatively modern warehouses that face St. Francis and back up to Commerce. They are very much in the way of any significant westward expansion of the arts district, and they stand out like so many sore thumbs; three are wholly or partly clad with sheet metal, the fourth with what appears to be concrete panels. Nevertheless, they appear to house functioning wholesale and service industry businesses, which means that any plan to demolish them would entail the added cost of relocating the firms.

THREE OPTIONS

As we see it, the City has three basic options. It can do little or nothing. It can adopt a policy of providing financial incentives to encourage artists and creative businesses within the district. Or it can take a more active role by relocating the non-arts businesses now on St. Francis Street to suitable industrial areas elsewhere in Wichita, thereby creating more space

for artists and arts activities close to Commerce Street. Let us look at these options in more detail.

- **Do little or nothing**, allowing the organic evolution of Commerce Street to continue at its own pace. The arts district is well-established, after all, and it has clearly survived the competition of Old Town and Delano, not to mention the mixed blessing represented by the nearby Arena. At least one artist on the arts district's website has a St. Francis Street address, which suggests that the district may be starting to expand in that direction. If the City elects to let nature take its course, limiting its role to providing suitable signage (which could include the kind of bold gateway marker that identifies Chinatown areas in many cities), marketing assistance, and streetscape improvements already on the drawing board (including the proposed Commerce Street extension and intersection with St. Francis Street at the south end of the district), this trend may continue.

But the growth is unlikely to be vigorous, and it may be slowed or even halted by economic forces. Moreover, Commerce Street as an arts district is fragile. The development pressures caused by the Arena and a healthier real estate market are real, and they are happening today. All in all, we think the City will need to intervene if Commerce Street is to remain arts-focused. In the absence of meaningful intervention, we think that Commerce Street will begin to die in the next ten years as private developers with deep pockets are drawn to the area by the commercial potential of a location near the Arena. And Commerce Street's artists, who are already concerned about high real estate taxes in the area, will begin migrating to other neighborhoods.

- **Adopt a policy of financial incentives** to encourage the area's artists and creative businesses to relocate on or close to St. Francis Street. The City has made extensive use of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts in recent years; the Old Town TIF District dates from 1991 and has done much, we believe, to drive development there. Many cities have established programs to make it easier for artists to live and work in designated arts districts. In some cities, for example, income derived from the sale of art works created or sold in arts districts is exempt from income and/or sales tax. Other financial breaks include real estate tax credits and low-interest loans for the acquisition or improvement of buildings. The City of Richmond, Virginia, offers fee waivers and interest rate reductions for artists who borrow from the City's revolving loan fund, marketing assistance for qualified artists and arts groups, and financial incentives for those who create live/work housing for artists. (For details, see: <http://www.richmondgov.com/EconomicCommunityDevelopment/documents/>

[regulatoryIncentivesOverview6-18.pdf](#). Another useful resource can be found here: <http://www.creativeenterprisezone.org/content/about-creative-enterprise-zone>.)

To encourage investment in arts-related and other desirable development, some cities have adopted PILOT (payment in lieu of tax) programs that have the effect of lowering property tax obligations for a period of years. PILOTs are widely employed for projects that have some social purpose, including affordable housing. Other kinds of tax abatement programs exist in other cities to encourage strategic and catalytic development.

It is well documented that artists are on the leading edge of positive economic change in cities. This kind of change has been documented in four of the downtown markets where Artspace has created spaces for artists; see “Taking a Measure of Creative Placemaking,” page 14. The full report discusses the Return on Investment (ROI) many cities seek from strategic developments. It also shows how spaces for artists can align with city priorities and agendas and can complement the goals of artists and the creative workforce to keep spaces affordable so that they do not become victims of their own success.

- **Take a more active role** by working with real estate brokers to relocate the non-arts businesses elsewhere in Wichita and then working with developers to replace the warehouses with new infill structures that match the scale and industrial look of the existing brick warehouses. Here is a tool used in Denver to achieve this end: <http://www.creativespaceagent.com/property>. Existing historic buildings would be preserved, renovated, and converted to arts uses. If the City is willing to make an investment on this scale, and especially if it offers the kinds of financial incentives described in the previous paragraph, the Commerce Street Arts District would be in position to grow as rapidly as the market can take it. Otherwise we think Commerce Street is pretty much stuck in its own little corner.

Creating a critical mass of spaces for creative people is critical for Commerce Street’s long-term health. Unlike Delano, Old Town, or the Douglas Design District, Commerce Street has no where to go unless the warehouses disappear and are replaced by higher density facilities where artists can live and/or work. A mixed-use artist housing project, for example, with at least 50 units of residential space plus ground floor commercial uses for the arts, could be a dynamic way to expand and secure Commerce Street as a destination arts district.

A case can be made for each of these options. On the whole, however, we favor an active rather than passive role for the City, and we think the strongest approach is to combine

options two and three to provide both physical and financial opportunities for artists. The relocation of the existing warehouses could be undertaken in phases over a period of several years, but given the vigor with which Project Downtown has been advancing the makeover of downtown Wichita – 27 projects representing \$370 million of investment completed since 2010, nine more under construction representing an additional \$112 million – it's clear that a faster pace is within the City's capability. And we note that two of those 27 completed projects are on Commerce Street. In other words, the City is already active here.

Given the amount of planning that has taken place in Wichita in recent years, civic leaders may feel that the needed planning has been completed as far as Commerce Street is concerned. Our impression, however, is that large-scale initiatives like the Project Downtown Master Plan have focused mainly on other parts of downtown Wichita. If so, we think a Small Area Plan may be in order to establish guidelines and specific goals for the development of the Commerce Street area. This entails a formal planning process and is perhaps more involved than the City would like, given the size of the Commerce Street district and the existing master plan for the entire downtown area.

But it would have the advantage of touching all the bases – zoning, development, transportation, parks and recreation, and much more – at a time when the Arena and its 90 events a year are part of the equation. The planning area can be defined to include the Mead Street area, the relatively lightly developed area on the west side of St. Francis Street, or any other neighborhood close to the Arts District. We think it's a good idea, though not an essential one: many arts districts do surprisingly well without master planning. Here is an example of a Small Area Plan developed for a neighborhood in Minneapolis:
http://the2020partners.com/docs/North_Loop_Small_Area_Plan.pdf.

A ROLE FOR LIVE/WORK HOUSING?

Artspace specializes in the development and operation of affordable live/work housing for artists, so we have considerable experience in that realm and know that a well-placed live/work project can have a significant impact on its neighborhood. Down the road, especially if the City chooses an active role in the expansion of the Commerce Street Arts District and a market survey identifies a need, we think there can be a place for affordable live/work housing in the area. It would complement rather than compete with the market-rate housing that already exists on Commerce, and it would bring a permanent population of artists and their families to the area. Another Wichita arts district that would benefit from a live/work development, in our view, is the Douglas Design District, where there are too many vacant buildings and vacant lots to give the district the cohesion it needs. An affordable live/work project in that area could not only provide needed housing and studio space for artists, it could also attract additional development.

Although we did not engage with Wichita around the topic of artist housing, it was clear that this element is missing from the creative sector ecosystem in Wichita. Securing permanently affordable spaces for artists in the area will help guarantee long-term affordability in a dynamic, rapidly expanding metro area where affordability is becoming an issue for artists and creative businesses in several neighborhoods.

In order to understand that creative ecosystem in Wichita, we highly recommend an Arts Market Survey to better understand the depth of the artist market and their demand for space of various kinds. This kind of information has proven a valuable tool for Artspace's own work as well as for cities and for-profit developers who, until they understand the creative market, may not have considered the possibilities.

CONCLUSION

We came away from Wichita with the conviction that the City is on the right track with respect to its downtown area and its four arts districts. The action steps we recommend are by no means as elaborate or expensive as many others that Wichita has undertaken in the last decade; the Intrust Bank Arena alone was a \$205 million investment. The cost of acquiring the non-arts buildings that block the growth of the Commerce Street Arts District, relocating their businesses to more suitable locations, and providing the financial incentives that developers and artists need to build the arts district in that direction would be a small fraction of that nine-figure sum. But in the long run, an investment in a sustainable arts district in this neighborhood could pay very substantial benefits on the south side of Downtown Wichita.

Appendix: Further Reading

A Survey of Public Policy Incentives for Cultural Districts

Creative Community Builders

http://metrisarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/plan-it_appendices.pdf (p. 182)

South St. Anthony / Raymond Station Area Development Objectives

Corridor Development Initiative

www.corridordevelopment.org/pdfs/cdi_westmidway_devguidelines_final.pdf

The Chicago Avenue Arts District

ArtPlace

www.artplaceamerica.org/articles/the-chicago-avenue-arts-district-4/

Shanghai SoHo – 50 Moganshan Road

Century Online China Art Networks

<http://www.chinaartnetworks.com/feature/wen21.shtml>

What Makes an Arts District Successful?

The Urbanist

www.spur.org/publications/library/article/what-makes-arts-district-successful

Arts and Entertainment Districts

Maryland State Arts Council

<http://www.msac.org/artsandentertainment>

About the Art District

Denver's Art District on Santa Fe

<http://www.artdistrictonsantafe.com/about>

Zoning for Artists

ArtistLink

www.artistlink.org/?q=spacetoolbox/formunicipalities/zoningforartists

Clusters of Creativity: Innovation and Growth in Montana

Regional Technology Strategies

www.rtsinc.org/publications/pdf/mt_creative.pdf

Artistic neighborhood want to preserve character amid light rail development

MPR news

www.minnesota.publicradio.org/collections/special/columns/cities/archive/2013/01/st-paul-to-consider-protecting-an-artistic-spot-thats-a-target-for-development-attracted-by-lightrail.shtml (online only, 118 pages)

Clusters of Creativity – North Carolina Arts Council

www.rtsinc.org/publications/pdf/

Taking a Measure of Creative Placemaking: Artspace and Metris Arts Consulting
<http://www.artspace.org/ideas-insights/taking-measure-creative-placemaking>



Future home of Tannery World Dance & Cultural Center, an Artspace project in Santa Cruz, California

artspace

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